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Yugoslav Sojourn: Notes from the Other Side

January 2000

Anyone in the United States seeking to hop a plane to Belgrade discovers that it cannot be done. The international sanctions imposed against Yugoslavia ended all air travel to what remains of that beleaguered country. This past August, I and a group of North Americans, endeavoring to bring medicines to the Yugoslav Red Cross and glean a first-hand impression of the country, had to fly to Budapest, Hungary, then endure a seven-hour bus ride (counting the long delay at the border) to reach Belgrade.

Belgrade is a city with a funky beauty of its own, with cobblestone malls, elaborate monuments, parks, and elegantly aging edifices sporting a distinctly Old World patina. There are more cars than one would have expected in a country suffering from sanctions. The people do not appear haggard, hungry, depressed, or unhealthy. There are no beggars or derelicts to be seen; no one in tatters; no one asleep in a doorway or rummaging through garbage cans; no cadres of prostitutes plying their trade. The free market has not yet taken complete hold. A welfare state still exists, which, in the eyes of some neoliberal western leaders, may be Yugoslavia's biggest crime. The state-supported economy has prevented the kind of mass social misery witnessed in some other Eastern European countries.

Speaking of crime, there seems to be little fear of it in Belgrade. We strolled for hours around the city and could see women walking alone or together well past midnight, displaying not a trace of apprehension. In the evening, the parks are crowded with people, unlike parks in some U.S. cities that empty out after sundown. To the organizer of our delegation, Barry Lituchy, a historian who teaches at Kingsborough Community College in the City University of New York, Belgrade appeared noticeably poorer and more worn than on his visit four years earlier. One new sign of hard times is the overabundance of street vendors with their paltry offerings of recycled knickknacks, clothing, CDs, tapes, books, magazines, cosmetics, and bootlegged cigarettes and liquor.

All over the city one sees graffiti denouncing NATO, the United States, and Bill Clinton in the most bitter terms. "NATO" is repeatedly represented with the "N" in the form of a swastika. More than once I saw "Free Texas" sprayed across walls. As one citizen explained, Texas is heavily populated by Mexicans or persons of Mexican descent, many of whom suffer more serious cultural discrimination and economic adversity than did Kosovo Albanians; should not Yugoslavia and other nations do whatever they can to make Texas into a separate polity for oppressed Mexicans? The same logic applied to the "Free Corsica" graffiti sprayed across the

French cultural center, gutted, along with the US and British cultural centers, by outraged Yugoslavs.

We passed a billboard displaying a large image of a beautifully colored Easter egg, with the saying (in English) “They believe in bombs. We believe in God.” Along with its many churches, Belgrade reveals remnants of its Communist past. Many streets and buildings are named for famous communist leaders and partisan fighters. One major thoroughfare is “Boulevard of the Revolution,” another is “Lenin Boulevard,” and another is “Brotherhood and Unity Highway.” Surely, I thought, U.S. leaders will not leave this country alone until those names are changed to “IMF Avenue” and “Morgan Trust Way,” or at least renamed after some orthodox saints or reactionary military heroes of yore.

We visited the Chinese embassy, an architecturally distinct edifice standing on a broad lot with only some housing projects in the background, much of its interior pulverized by three missiles. The CIA's claim that the attack was a case of mistaken identity seemed less credible than ever to us. Even a cursory inspection makes one wonder how the CIA could have mistaken the embassy for the Federal Directorate of Supply, an office building two blocks away. The U.S. ambassador had dined at the Chinese embassy and many U.S. journalists had visited it in its better days. If NATO attackers really did rely on “old maps” (why in this instance and not in any other?), such maps would have shown an empty lot. More plausible is the view that the embassy was deliberately targeted because the Chinese were giving such strong support to Belgrade, and possibly because the embassy was being used to gather electronic intelligence on U.S. aerial flights over Yugoslavia. On the embassy gate, under the pictures of the three employees who perished in the bombing, Yugoslav citizens had left candles, flowers and condolence cards.

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The Serbs I spoke to sometimes downplayed the damage they had suffered from NATO’s attacks, out of a sense of pride, as if to tell the NATO bully, “You haven’t hurt us all that much.” At the same time, they wanted to educate foreign visitors about the destruction perpetrated against them. Our Serbian hosts tried to describe the deafening noise, flames, and smoke that made the bombings a terrifying experience. The aerial attacks came every evening and frequently went on all night (rarely during the day in Belgrade). Five hundred meters from where we were staying, a private home had been hit and some of its residents killed. The survivors put up a sign on the damaged facade bitterly announcing: “Sorry, we are still alive.” For some, it was so strange, all this death coming from the skies. Even stranger was the way everything now appeared back to normal, with much of the wreckage cleared away. "It seems as if it never happened, like it was a bad dream," remarked one man.

Still there are plenty of reminders. Displayed in various police stations around the city are dozens of photos of officers killed while performing rescue operations or other duties during the aerial attacks. Casualties among rescue workers were high. NATO had devised the devilish technique of bombing a site, then waiting fifteen minutes to a half hour—just time enough for rescue teams to arrive and get working—then hitting the target a second time, killing many of the would-be rescuers, and making it extremely dangerous for teams to dig for survivors. This method of delayed follow-up attack on a civilian target had never been tried before in modern warfare. It was one of NATO’s innovative war crimes.

The facilities destroyed by air attacks were mostly publicly owned. The Usce business center was hit by several missiles. This high-rise contained the headquarters of Slobodan Milosevic's Socialist Party, and also housed the headquarters of JUL (Yugoslav United Left), a coalition of 23 communist and left parties, closely allied with the Socialist Party. Various ministry offices were demolished. The huge, state-run Hotel Yugoslavia was made uninhabitable by NATO missiles, while the corporate owned Hyatt Hotel, with its even more imposing, all-glass facade —as inviting a target as any mad bomber might want—suffered not a scratched windowpane. Buildings that displayed highly visible rooftop advertising signs that read "Panasonic," "Coca-Cola," "Diners Club International," and "McDonald's,' the latter replete with immense golden arches, survived perfectly intact.

The destruction in other cities and towns was far greater than anything inflicted upon Belgrade. Several neighborhoods in the small mining town of Aleksinac were entirely wiped out. Production facilities in Nis and Cuprija were reduced to rubble. Kragujevac, an industrial city in Central Serbia, suffered immense damage. Its huge, efficiently state-run Zastava factory was thoroughly demolished, causing huge amounts of toxic chemicals to spill from the factory's generators. Zastava had employed tens of thousands of workers who produced cars, trucks, and tractors sold domestically and abroad. NATO attacks left some 80 percent of its workforce without a means of livelihood. Publicly owned Zastava factories exist all over Yugoslavia. The attackers knew their locations, and destroyed many of them. Those not bombed are out of production for want of crucial materials or a recipient for their products.

In Nis, cruise missiles pulverized the tobacco and cigarette production plant, one of the most successful in Europe. State-run food processing sites were leveled. And, we were told, one worker-managed factory was contaminated with depleted uranium.

The city of Aleksinac and additional socialist strongholds in southern Serbia were bombed especially heavily, with many civilian deaths. Leaders from Aleksinac and several other cities in Serbia's "Red Belt" were convinced that they were pounded so mercilessly primarily because they were socialist, a suspicion reinforced by the fact that the region contained almost no heavy industry.

NATO bombed historic sites, cultural monuments, museums, and churches. "Not even Hitler did that," remarked Federal Minister for Refugees Bratislava Morina. In Novi Sad, worker-managed factories that somehow had survived the pitiless years of sanctions were reduced to ruins, along with bus and train depots. Major bridges were knocked down, blocking all shipping on the Danube, cluttering the river's bottom with heavy metal, and severing most of Serbia from the rest of Europe. Because of its depth, the Danube was judged impossible to clean, but millions of people are still drinking its water.

Yugoslav electrical and construction firms used to be competitive with western ones, winning contracts abroad on a regular basis. The NATO bombing eliminated that competition quite nicely. Heating plants and the entire oil processing industry were badly crippled. The chief engineer at an electrical power transformer station on the outskirts of Zemun showed us transformers that had been knocked out by a variety of weaponry including tomahawk cruise missiles, phosphorus bombs, and air-to-surface missiles. Other missiles, designed for subterranean targets, exploded beneath the earth's surface, ripping apart underground transmitter cables. There was little hope of repair since international sanctions deprived the Yugoslavs of replacement parts made by Westinghouse.

The inability to rebuild their electrical power systems leaves many towns and cities throughout Serbia without any prospect of heat in the winter ahead, and without sufficient means of supplying water to certain urban populations. There is no shortage of water in Yugoslavia, especially after the summer rains that caused serious floods. But water distribution and purification systems in places like Novi Sad are badly damaged and not easy to repair. Whole sectors of the city are without drinking water, but water is available for washing clothes and waste elimination.

The destruction of fertilizer and nitrogen plants has created difficulties for next year's planting. One official told us that agricultural crops were mysteriously dying. The situation was being investigated, and there was much fear of hunger ahead. At one oil refinery site we saw burnt-out cars, shattered storage tanks, and acres blackened with crude oil, leaving the groundwater toxified. We saw a bird about the size of a robin, completely drenched in black crude and bleeding from the burning effect of the oil. It was unable to do anything except weakly flutter its wings and stagger about the road.

Sometimes the NATO attackers carefully selected their targets; other times they seemingly unloaded at random. Generally, Minister Morina maintained, they hit sites “in a way that would be most painful to us.” We saw one housing project of some seventy units destroyed. The occupants had lost all their possessions, and most were without money to pay for new residences. We were told that many of the housing project’s survivors had sustained injuries, and many were suffering psychological shock and depression. An adjacent elementary school, named after Svetozar Markovich, identified to us as “the founder of socialism in the Balkans,” was seriously damaged, but undergoing reconstruction.

We visited a village outside Novi Sad, containing nothing that remotely resembled a military or infrastructure target. Yet, ten homes had been hit. Some of them remained occupied with Serb refugees from Croatia, looking like stage-set homes with front walls and rooftops missing. The occupants had no jobs and no funds to buy the materials needed to rebuild, nor were building materials readily available. Plastic sheets over shattered windows and an outdoor cooking stove were all the comforts they had for the oncoming winter.

In Nis, Surdulica, and Aleksinac there were deliberate attacks on residential neighborhoods. On one street in Nis, fifteen residents were killed by cluster bombs—our tax dollars at work. Members of our delegation met people who still shook with fear when talking about the attacks. Most had no hope of rebuilding.

In Rakovica and elsewhere, NATO bombs smashed hospitals and maternity wards. Not long after the bombing ended, NATO officials announced that only a few hundred people had been killed by the aerial attacks. How they arrived at this figure from afar is hard to understand. According to Yugoslav sources, over five hundred military personnel and some two thousand civilians perished in what was less a war than a one-sided slaughter. Scores of individuals listed as missing may still be buried under the wreckage. “Who will be charged with these war crimes?” one citizen asked angrily. After the war, health workers began seeing a dramatic increase in chronic ailments, including cardiovascular, respiratory, and mental health problems. Officials thought the 78-days of bombings would be the worst of it, but they have since concluded that the sanctions would continue to inflict massive attrition.

Because of the sanctions, Yugoslav health services face severe shortages of medicines, surgical materials, oncology drugs, diabetic medications, and other supplies. The Yugoslav Red Cross has no problem recruiting blood donors, but it faces a drastic shortage of blood bags, which are not manufactured in Yugoslavia. It has issued an urgent appeal for baby food, powdered milk, canned foods, cooking oil, rice, beans, pasta, preserved vegetables, detergents, soaps, tents, beds, bedding, sleeping bags, towels, candles, and oil lamps. Also needed are plaster bandages, compress gauze, elastic net and tubular bandages, disinfectants, water purification supplies, test strips for blood and urine, dialysis machines, antibiotics, medications for respiratory ailments and blood diseases, and various diagnostic tests.

Prevented from going into Kosovo, the Yugoslav Red Cross is unable to trace hundreds of missing persons (Serbs, nonseparatist Albanians, and others) in areas occupied by KFOR, the NATO occupation force. Some 130 humanitarian organizations are pouring aid into Kosovo, including Red Cross societies from KFOR states. The operating rules of the International Red Cross stipulate that member organizations entering a country must work in cooperation with the Red Cross of that host country, something not done in this case by most of them. Letters of protest from the Yugoslav Red Cross to these member organizations have gone unanswered. Relatively few national Red Cross societies have responded well to Yugoslavia's appeal for help: the Bulgarian, Rumanian, and all the Scandinavian Red Cross organizations have sent aid. And much assistance has come from Red Cross organizations in China and, surprisingly, Germany.

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Yugoslavia faces a refugee crisis of daunting magnitude. It now hosts more displaced persons per capita than just about any other nation. Most of the ethnic cleansing throughout the former Yugoslavia has been directed against the Serbs, a fact seldom if ever mentioned in the U.S. media. NATO and its secessionist allies drove more than 700,000 Serbs from their ancestral homes in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In addition, over several hundred thousand Serbs, Roma (gypsies), Turks, Gorani, and Albanians (who would not cooperate with the KLA) have fled Kosovo and flooded into what remains of Yugoslavia. Some refugees have been triply displaced, fleeing Croatia for Bosnia, then to Kosovo, and now to what remains of unoccupied Serbia. Three well-constructed refugee settlements built several years ago by the Serbian Republic, intended as permanent homes, were destroyed by NATO attacks, as was the headquarters of the Serbian Socialist party agency that dealt with refugee problems.

One of the hardest hit groups in the KLA cleansing of Kosovo was the Roma. Driven out of homes they had lived in for generations, many fled to Macedonia—only to find that the refugee camps there were run by KLA. In order to gain entry, they had to pay 500 German marks and declare Albanian nationality, according to the refugees interviewed by Sani Rifati, president of Voice of Roma, an educational and humanitarian aid organization based in California. Rifati traveled to Italy to deliver aid and interview Romany refugees arriving in Brindisi. They told of being surrounded by police upon arrival, then approached by Albanian interpreters who informed them that in order to procure food they would have to present themselves as Albanians fleeing from Serbs—instead of what they really were, Roma fleeing from Albanian KLA militia.

Unlike ethnically cleansed Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, Yugoslavia remains a multi-ethnic society, with some twenty-six nationality groups, including Serbs and hundreds of thousands of Hungarians, Croats, Rumanians, Czechs, and Slovaks. Yugoslavia is the only country in the world to give official standing to 19,000 Ruthenians, a national group of western Ukrainian origin situated in Vojvodina, Serbia's other autonomous province (besides Kosovo). Vojvodina officials claim that all these various nationalities have education in their own languages from nursery school to high school. Hungarians in Vojvodina can go through medical school studying in Hungarian. Minister Morina claimed that before the NATO war, there had been some fifty Albanian-language publications in Yugoslavia, including even a Playboy type magazine. She said that in earlier times Albanians had occupied such prominent offices as the presidency of Yugoslavia, the presidency of the national youth organization, and of the trade union association. Albanians would still have prominent political positions in the society, she maintained, had they not chosen to withdraw from the political process. Morina's own husband was director of security and an Albanian, and her children identified themselves as Albanian.

The proceedings of Vojvodina's provincial parliament were simultaneously translated into six languages, according to its president Zivorad Smiljanic, a gynecologist and obstetrician by profession, who met with our group when we visited Novi Sad. At present, U.S. leaders are busily funneling money to Hungarian separatist elements in Vojvodina and calling for putting the province under Hungary's suzerainty. Smiljanic pointed out that two million Hungarians in Rumania and 600,000 in Slovakia enjoyed few of the national rights extended to the 300,000 Hungarian ethnics in Vojvodina, yet the United States and even Hungary seemed not too concerned about them. The Hungarians living in Vojvodina are not concentrated in any one region. In 1991 some of them went to Hungary but did not fare too well, Smiljanic said. In 1999, facing the NATO war, almost no Hungarians departed and 90 percent responded to the military call. Indeed, he claimed, all national minorities remain loyal to their country, Yugoslavia.

Smiljanic held forth on a number of other subjects: As an obstetrician he had occasion to observe the remains of eleven children killed in one town by the aerial attack. Your leaders talk about human rights, he noted bitterly, but the right of children to live is among the highest of human rights. Was it democracy in action when NATO bombs destroyed schools, daycare centers, and hospitals with patients in their beds? Your leaders talk of freedom of information, yet they kill journalists. They talk of responsible government and accountable rule, yet nineteen Nato countries engaged in hostilities against Yugoslavia without consent of any of their own parliaments and against mass protests in their countries. All the government parties in the NATO countries that partook of the war lost seats in the subsequent elections to the European parliament, said Smiljanic.

When asked what were Vojvodina's most urgent needs, Smiljanic boomed, "We wish most of all that the international community would leave us alone, lift the sanctions, and stop giving us the benefit of their 'guidance' and 'aid.'" Despite ten years of sanctions, he went on, his compatriots live better than do most people in Hungary, Rumania, Poland, and Bulgaria. And now that those nations are joining NATO they will plunge still deeper into debt, each borrowing tens of billions of dollars to upgrade their military forces to NATO standards. "Clinton and Albright have destroyed us and now we will have to rebuild—on their terms. The only god worshipped in the New World Order is the Dollar. The war was good only for business and arms dealers," concluded Smiljanic.

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A founding member of the United Nations and of the Nonaligned Nations Conference, and once a regular participant in UN peacekeeping missions, Yugoslavia today has been reduced to a pariah, the only country to have been expelled from the United Nations. It is also proudly one of the few nations in Europe that never asked to join NATO.

Western leaders and media have tirelessly portrayed the Milosevic government as a bloodthirsty dictatorship. The Yugoslavs argue that this "dictatorship" has a democratically elected coalition government with a parliament containing representation from seven different parties, including vocal opposition ones. The various parties have their own newspapers, which are sold at newsstands around Belgrade. Indeed, there are only two state-owned dailies but numerous opposition publications, some of which are well financed from abroad. Meanwhile cafes and theaters perform skits mercilessly satirizing Milosevic, and thousands have demonstrated against his government without fear of being gunned down by death squads or incarcerated for long periods—which is the risk demonstrators run in any number of US-backed regimes.

I saw opposition posters in Belgrade, including glass encased ones on the walls of buildings along main thoroughfares, damning Milosevic in the harshest terms, with the address of the sponsoring organization provided at the bottom of the poster—hardly an advisable way to operate when living under the heel of a ruthless dictator. For a police state, Yugoslavia appears to suffer from a notable scarcity of police on the streets. Not until my third evening in Belgrade did I see two cops strolling along without benefit of nightsticks—in marked contrast to the omnipresent and heavily armed security police and military personnel one sees in any number of U.S. client-state "democracies" in Latin America and elsewhere. In addition, Yugoslav citizens are free to travel anywhere in the world—which is not true of U.S. citizens.

Milosevic recently did one thing that must have convinced western capitalist leaders of his inhumanity. The ICN pharmaceutical plant in Yugoslavia began as a joint venture with state and private capital. Much of the latter was provided by Milan Panic, a rich Serbian businessman who had been living in the United States. Panic began paying a private staff to take over complete ownership of ICN. (He is also said to have tried to organize a strike against the Yugoslav government after losing his bid for the presidency in 1992.) In February 1999, in response to Panic's maneuvers, Milosevic sent in troops to occupy ICN, then handed it over to worker-management. U.S. media called the takeover a violation of "human rights."

U.S. officials and press pundits repeatedly claim that Yugoslavs do not have the benefit of an objective news source, by which they mean the western corporate-owned mainstream media that faithfully propagate the US-NATO line on all matters of war and peace. In fact, as of summer's end, western or pro-western media were just about the only major news source one could access in Belgrade. The three government television channels 1, 2, and 3, and all public radio stations—most of which offered a critical view of NATO's policy of dismembering, privatizing, and deindustrializing Yugoslavia—were bombed out of existence. "They destroyed everything," exclaimed our boarding-house host Nikola Moraca, "We get no Milosevic government station, only opposition programs and sports."

Yugoslavs could also get CNN, BBC, Discovery, and German television. If they had satellite dishes, as many did, they could receive all the U.S. networks. Not surprisingly, the Yugoslav opposition television channel, Studio B, survived untouched by NATO bombs. It presents mostly opposition programming and entertainment. Other Yugoslav TV stations do offer "TV

Politika" (a pro-government program) and what Nikola called "neutral programs" along with sitcoms, fashion shows, and other such puffery. In sum, the Yugoslavs had access to more pro-western media than to any that might represent a critical view of western policy. In this, they resemble most of the world.

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On the van I took for the long night's trip back to Budapest, I met my first Serbian yuppie: a young broker who worked via computer with the New York Stock Exchange. He was of the opinion that Milosevic was not a war criminal but still should hand himself over to the Hague Tribunal, just so the rest of the country could get some peace (as if having Milosevic's head would cause western leaders to leave Yugoslavia in peace). He went on to tell me what a wonderful place Belgrade was to live in, with its remarkable abundance of beautiful women and its low prices. The ample income he made went twice as far in the economically depressed city. His comments reminded me that hard times are not hard for everyone, especially not for people with money.

The van made an additional stop in Belgrade to pick up an attractive but unhappy looking young woman who, once seated, began crying as she told us that she was going to Spain for a long and indefinite period, leaving home and family because things were so difficult in Yugoslavia. War victimizes all sorts of people who are never included in the final toll.

It was not long before the stockbroker, displaying a most sympathetic demeanor, was making his moves on the young lady, as if encircling a prey. Again, I was reminded of how hard times for the many bring new opportunities for the privileged few.

Michael Parenti's most recent books are *To Kill a Nation: The Attack on Yugoslavia*, *Contrary Notions* and *The Assassination of Julius Caesar*.

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